

Cogon-Tarak Ridge

Search #2

February 8-10, 2008

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Friday, February 8, 2008

The day started early at approximately 3:15 am. After a quick oatmeal breakfast, we finished loading our personal gear and headed to the meeting point. At precisely 4:00 am our group departed the base for Mariveles. The team consisted of myself, Brad and Heather Blythe, Kevin Hamdorf, Spike Nasmyth, Ralph Wetterhahn, Carl Weltke, and several members of the Jungle Environment Survival Training school. They would serve as our porters and guides. Along the way to Mariveles, we picked up several more local volunteers, some of whom were very familiar with the search area due to familial ties to the region. The trip down to the trailhead went fairly smoothly, with only one slight delay due to equipment problems with one of the Filipino guides. As we drove up the approach to the trail head, some discussion broke out between the Filipinos. Several of the volunteers from the Bataan area became convinced we were headed in the wrong direction. They claimed to know of a wreck site on a different ridge. This forced a significant early decision. After much debate, we decided to split the search party into two groups. Brad and Heather Blythe volunteered to go to this new crash site with a small band of guides. the main part of the group would continue as planned to Cogon-Tarak. Upon arrival at the trailhead, we unloaded all of the search equipment, food, water, tents, and camera gear. Very quickly, the gear was divided up, packs were filled, and we set off on the first part of the trip: the climb to the ridge. It was 8:35 am.

It became apparent very quickly that we would have some problems along the way. This was not a surprise, as any expedition of any size encounters unforeseen challenges. The first major hurdle happened when Doming, one of the Filipino guides who was familiar with the crash sites, collapsed on the trail. As the group marched, it inevitably became stretched out as the stronger hikers moved forward at a quicker pace. I had stayed near the very back of the line since I had a medical kit in my pack. As we broke out of the jungle into an area of tall grass, Doming started teetering, then collapsed. His son was able to catch him, and we laid him down on the trail. It seems the heat, the early morning, and the trail had proven a bit too much. After some carrots and a granola bar, a little water, and a cool towel, we were able to get him up and continue. We took most of his pack and redistributed it among the rest of us. One other member of the team was also struggling with the weight of his pack and the rigors of the trail. We lightened his load as well, and hiked on to the first rest area.

Late in the morning, after a couple hours of hiking, we approached a river in the bottom of the valley. There is a nice natural clearing there, with plenty of water to cook with from the river. We did not plan on stopping long, but the events on the trail caused us to change our plans.

Kevin and I came to the decision that we needed to stop and prepare lunch. The Filipinos got right down to business and cooked up a large batch of rice and opened a few cans of corned beef. Nothing like a few bites of food to perk up the group! But we still had to make some hard decisions. Kevin and I put our heads together. We knew some of the guys were struggling, and it was only going to get worse, as the trail is much more difficult beyond the river. Kevin took charge and did a masterful job of handling the situation. He convinced the two weak hikers to

abandon the search. We dispatched them with one strong hiker back to Subic Bay. It was tough to lose a good hiker, but we did not want to send the weak ones back alone. I can't stress enough how well Kevin did in this situation. Filipinos are loyal and prideful. We were asking one of the leaders of the Olongapo group to give up the search. If we handled it improperly, the whole group might have revolted to support their elder. Only Kevin's skills as a negotiator held the expedition team together at the river.

Onward we climbed. Ralph and Carl proceeded first and made good time up the ridge. The rest of the group moved at varying paces. The trail up Cogon-Tarak ridge is relentless beyond the river. The hike lasts nearly five hours, and there is literally less than one hundred yards of level ground. You climb with every step. It is also rarely a gentle slope. Mostly it is like climbing steep stairs. With a large, heavy pack on your back. About four hours into the trek, we broke out of the forest near the helicopter landing site. From here you can see the trail on up to the top of the ridge, where the Japanese crash site is located. Upon reaching the landing pad, we were able to reach Carl and Ralph by walkie-talkie. They were nearing the Japanese site. There is a really nice camp site below the helicopter landing pad. I discussed the rest of the climb with the local Bataan guides. They assured me that there was another campsite beyond, but close to, the Japanese wreck. I made the decision for everyone to continue up the ridge, rather than bunk down for the night near the helicopter landing site.

I think this is a good point in which to highlight one of the stars of the expedition. Jonmar, one of our JEST guides, went above and beyond all weekend. When we lost three hikers, but no gear, at the river, Jonmar took most of the gear off their packs. The result was that his pack ended up weighing more than he did. I took to calling him "Superman" because of his strength and determination. For the last hour of the hike, he would walk twenty paces and collapse. He would then catch his breath, climb to his feet, and walk twenty more paces. He never complained, and there was no doubt that he would complete the hike without any assistance. For the rest of my days, I will not forget Jonmar on the last hour of that grueling hike.

At roughly 4:30 in the afternoon, the last of the group trudged into the campsite above the Japanese crash. It was smiles all around as the packs were finally unslung for the last time that day. We didn't have too much more daylight, and lots to do, so we didn't waste much time.

One group started a fire and began working on dinner. Others got down to business setting up tents and shelters. Kevin and a few others surveyed the Japanese crash site and photographed the area. One very important job entailed inventorying our food and water supplies. Kevin and I rounded up everything we could find, and were slightly dismayed with our count. The hike up the ridge had been more grueling than we had anticipated, and the group consumed more water than planned. Luckily, we had anticipated having a problem, and a plan was already in place. Kevin contacted Spike by cellphone and we ordered more water and rice to be sent up the next day.

When you are out in the bush, nature rules your life a bit more than when you are at home. As the sun slipped below the horizon, everyone was ready to call it a day. There was just one more thing to do. The undisputed leader of the Aeta guides was man named Gary. Gary is truly one of a kind. He has spent most of his life in the jungle. He's multi-lingual, quick-witted, and full of good cheer. He also is deeply spiritual. Gary brought two candles up the mountain that day. We all gathered around, and Gary lit a candle and said the names of each of the pilots we were looking for. "Kurosawa." "Stone." I can only speak for myself, but it was touching, and really brought into focus the reason we were up there. It was pitch dark by now, and nature was telling

us it was time to go to sleep, and as the moon rose, we laid down for a well-deserved night of rest. It was not long after 7:30 pm.

Saturday, February 9th, 2008

Up with the sun. I think most of us were surprised by the chill in the air during the night. The Philippines is a hot steamy place most of the time. But not on the top of a ridge nearly four thousand feet in the air. The wind really kicked up through the night, and the temperature was a few degrees cooler than many of us anticipated. We all seemed to welcome the warmth of the sun as it rose higher in the sky.

No one needed instructions. Breakfast was prepared; oatmeal for the Westerners, rice for the Filipinos. Not much time was wasted. After cleaning up, the whole group assembled to plan for the day. There would be two search teams, one headed by me, the other by Carl. Kevin and Ralph would spend the day excavating near the Japanese crash site, assisted by Gary and a few other Filipinos. They would also monitor the campsite.

The trail beyond the campsite only continues a short distance. Within about ten minutes of hiking, the two search teams were confronted with dense jungle. We separated, with Carl's team traversing high along the ridge, and my team proceeding lower in the valley. Our goal was to reach the cliff wall of Mt. Mariveles, and also to search along the bottom of the ravine leading down from the same cliff wall. It was not going to be easy to reach either place.

As you proceed through the jungle, there are many rock-falls, small streams, and ravines that you must cross. Each of these presents a significant challenge. They are often steep, slick, and lined with loose rock that can break away beneath your feet at any moment. Each time one of our teams approached one of these small ravines, we would be forced to hike up or down the ridge wall to find a suitable place to cross. This was not an easy task, as we were now off all trails, and were hacking our way through dense jungle. Sometimes you would have to climb one hundred feet to cross, only to then descend two hundred feet on the other side to find a break in the undergrowth. The Filipinos deserve all the credit here, as they led the way and broke the trails we followed. I can't begin to explain how dense the jungle was at some points. We literally walked on the jungle...our feet were not touching the ground, but rather the tangle of branches and plants that made up the lowest canopy. We kept going, however slowly, towards the last ravine. About two hours into the hike the jungle forced both groups to come near each other. We took a small break, and some members of the teams swapped places. My team proceeded to go the high route toward the cliff face of Mt. Mariveles. Carl's team proceeded to the bottom of the valley to search the rock fall running down from the cliffs. Eventually, my team climbed a steep abutment and found a small perch from where we could observe the cliff face. Every member took turns with a pair of high-powered binoculars and scanned the cliffs for signs of impact. Unfortunately, we could not find any marks. It took us another hour to reach the base of the cliffs. It was around 11:30 am.

From the area of large boulders at the very bottom of the cliff, just above the rockfall, my group fanned out for a search. We spread out horizontally at four different levels, and made our way across the face of the cliffs. Although not vertical, the area we were covering was nearly so. I'd estimate some of the areas to be roughly seventy to eighty degrees. The only way we were able to ascend these spots was to grab clumps of cogon grass and use them as handholds. This was

not an ideal situation. We were out of radio contact with anyone, including the other search team at the bottom of the ravine. A fall or injury of any kind would have been disastrous. Luckily, we encountered no difficulty.

After searching as thoroughly as we could we met and discussed the situation. One of the things that struck us was how deep into the corner of the mountain the cliff faces were located.

Combined with the ridge we had recently traversed to get to the cliffs (the one just across the rockfall, from where we observed the cliffs with binoculars), we became doubtful that an aircraft the size of Lt. Stone's could get that deep into the corner of the mountain. Using this information, we proceeded further Southwest along Mt. Mariveles.

The terrain here became nearly impassable. We crossed the most treacherous rockfall yet, and found almost no jungle thin enough to hack through. Again, I have to credit my Filipino guides, as they managed to find routes where there didn't seem to be any. We did our best to search up and down this area, but the going was excruciatingly slow. Every step also took us away from camp, and that was a concern that was increasingly on my mind.

Finally, at around 2:00 pm, we stopped for a water break. Each of us had taken only one liter of water, due to the shortage at camp. That way, in case there was no re-supply today, we would still have enough to hike down the mountain the following morning. After a long morning and early afternoon of bushwhacking through dense jungle, my entire team was getting low on water. It was apparent that it was time to head for camp. We chose a higher route along the face of Mt. Mariveles in order to search a new area on the way back. This route would also intersect the ridge line, where we hoped to find a trail. The jungle had different ideas for us. Each of our first two choices in routes ended in failure. The steepness of the mountain face, combined with the thickness and depth of the jungle, simply prevented us from going any further. We had to retrace our steps back to our rest area. We started on a third ill-fated attempt that would have had us climbing a vertical rock wall. Unfortunately, the rocks were extremely unstable, and therefore unclimbable. The only route we could find took us further away from camp and further up Mt. Mariveles. Slowly we climbed, until we actually reached the summit of mountain. From here, we could see the ridge where the camp was located and were able to get a broken message through to Kevin by radio. I requested water to be sent up the ridge in order to meet us prior to our reaching camp. We were getting critically low. After a few smiles and congratulations for inadvertently climbing Mt. Mariveles, we headed down the ridge line. Going down is always easier than going up, and we had perhaps one thousand feet of altitude to lose to get to the camp. The jungle wouldn't give up that easily, however, as we experienced the thickest spots yet. It is hard to describe what being off-trail in the dense jungle is like. There were points in the hike where I literally had three limbs tangled in vines and underbrush, and was using my free hand and a pocket knife to cut myself through. What few "trails" the guides found throughout the day were marginally passable for the diminutive Aeta, but certainly not large enough for my six-foot frame.

Eventually we made it within earshot of the camp. Again I requested water to be brought up the ridge, and to my team's great pleasure, Carl soon appeared with several bottles. Fifteen minutes later, we were back in camp. It was somewhere between 4:00 and 4:30 pm.

If I thought the first day's climb was difficult, the search on Saturday put Friday to shame. I have never had such a difficult or treacherous hike. We did reach our target area, however, and I feel somewhat confident that there is no aircraft wreckage in that area. I would say I am certain, except the jungle can hide things from you when you are only a couple of feet away. So there is a possibility that Lt. Stone's plane is on the face of Mt. Mariveles still, but I highly doubt it. I

conveyed these thoughts to Kevin, who interviewed both my team and Carl's. Carl's group had reached the bottom of the rockfall and proceeded to search up as high as they could get, with no evidence found. They had an even more difficult time than my team, at one point requiring the use of rock climbing harnesses and gear to ascend the steepest portions of their route. Kevin and Ralph, however, had an incredible day at the Japanese crash site. Several important artifacts were found, and Ralph's knowledge of aircraft archeology and crash investigation proved invaluable.

One issue remained. We had not been re-supplied as promised. This meant we were going to have to go on water rationing for the night, as well as enjoying minimal food. Decisions were made, orders were given, and everyone set about preparing a meager dinner and getting ready to bunk down. After the sun had gone down completely, and it was pitch black outside, there was a commotion in part of the camp. It seems our intrepid re-suppliers had finally wandered in. They had for some reason climbed the wrong ridge all day, only to realize there mistake late in the afternoon. In true Filipino fashion, they were not to be stopped. They simply walked down one mountain, across the valley floor through thick jungle, and up another mountain to our camp. This was no small feat, and one for which we were all grateful. Food and water were now plentiful, so a large batch of rice was prepared, cans of tuna and corned beef were opened, and everyone went to bed a little happier. Before we wandered off to our sleeping quarters, Carl, Kevin, Ralph and I enjoyed a few minutes around the flashlight re-telling the events of the day, and swapping stories of other adventures. It's always nice to end a grueling day with a few laughs.

Sunday, February 10th, 2008

Awake at sunrise once again. I'm always amazed at how quickly we become so in tune with the cycle of nature once we are out in it. There was not much to do today but break camp and head down the mountain. Our new friends, the ones who had brought our food and water the previous evening, claimed to know of the crash site. Since we have heard that from so many different people over the past couple of years, we didn't get overly excited. Nonetheless, we chose to delay our departure from camp while they checked out the site. Off they went, and about two hours later they returned empty handed. Not conceding defeat, they claimed that the crash is in the area they suspect, but the terrain was too rough for them to get to it. We will have to analyze that information and possibly act on it another day.

The first part of the descent went fairly quickly. Everyone took their first break at the helicopter landing site, where Kevin composed a group photo of everyone involved in the search. From there, it was a few more hours to the river, where we refilled some water bottles for the last stretch to the trailhead. Just beyond this point, we met Brad and Heather Blythe, who were coming up to meet us on the trail that day. They briefed us on their weekend, since we had not been in contact with them since Friday morning. Their search had problems of its own, and turned up little new information. They were lead to a pile of metal in the jungle, but it is unlikely that the metal came from an aircraft.

Eventually, everyone made it back to the trailhead. I was very happy to have everyone back in one piece, with no injuries. That is quite extraordinary for an undertaking of this size. Gear was loaded back into the trucks, wages were paid, and we headed for Yorkie's for a cold drink and a review of the weekend.

Conclusion

We learned a great deal on this trek, from how to plan, how to pack, even how to hire guides. Future searches will benefit from this knowledge, as we plan on being smaller and faster. The great disappointment, of course, was that we didn't find Lt. Stone. There had been high hopes at the start that we would be successful. After surveying the terrain myself, I am doubtful that Lt. Stone made it as far as Mt. Mariveles. Considering the written accounts, I think there may be another likely search area along the ridge just prior to Mt. Mariveles. Actually, this coincides with the area the re-suppliers identified as a crash site. They claimed the territory was too difficult to search, which again coincides with written accounts. How we proceed and figure out how to search this area is currently under discussion.

Sgt. Kurosawa's crash site provided many new clues. Ralph Wetterhahn was able to ascertain with a remarkable certainty the angle of impact of the crash, and the likely scenario just prior to the crash. This information is useful in trying to decipher just where Lt. Stone may have been flying when the fight ended.

Sometimes what you know not to be true is as important as what you know to be true. I think we ruled out many areas and are able to narrow our search in the future. We're not done yet!

Ryan F. Bach
February 24th, 2008